Functional Assessment Procedure

Wetland functional assessment is a process that measures the capacity of a wetland to perform specific ecological functions. These functions include surface water storage, nutrient cycling, particulate retention, and habitat for plants and animals.

Wetland functional assessment is used by NRCS to evaluate wetland mitigation requirements and wetland Minimal Effect exemption requests. For example, national NRCS policy dictates that "offsite mitigation" (that is, when a wetland is restored, enhanced or created to compensate for a violation in another location on or off a given tract) requires application of a functional assessment to determine the acreage of mitigation required (see NFSAM Part 517.11). In addition, if a wetland site is being considered for a Minimal Effect exemption, a functional assessment may be needed to help determine if the loss of the wetland will have a minimal effect on the ecological functions and values of the surrounding area. This is also a national policy requirement (see NFSAM Part 516.10).

The NFSAM mandates the use of either the Hydrogeomorphic Functional Assessment (HGM) methodology, or a procedure established by the State Conservationist in consultation with the State Technical Committee. In Florida, the Wetland Rapid Assessment Procedure (WRAP) has been approved by the State Technical Committee and adopted for use. The WRAP was originally developed by the South Florida Water Management District. It has been modified for application statewide and is used by the Jacksonville District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. A copy of the WRAP manual is located in this subsection of the eFOTG or can be downloaded from the following website: http://www.sfwmd.gov/org/reg/nrm/wrap99.htm.

Briefly, the WRAP evaluates a wetland by assigning numerical rankings to six variables that represent functional attributes. These variables are wildlife utilization, wetland overstory/shrub canopy, wetland vegetative ground cover, wetland buffer, field indicators of wetland hydrology, and water quality input and treatment. Numerical rankings are based on the best professional judgment of the evaluators and the six scores are averaged to provide a single final score for the wetland. This score is then multiplied by the wetland acreage to determine the "functional capacity units" for a given wetland, which can then be used to determine how many acres of a proposed type of mitigation are needed to achieve the same functional units as the converted site. WRAP scores are also used to determine whether a wetland is functioning at a minimum level that determines its eligibility for a Minimal Effect exemption (see FOTG Section I (E)1(b)4).

Florida NRCS policy requires a minimum of two people trained in the use of the WRAP perform a WRAP evaluation. Of these two, at least one must be a trained NRCS employee. The other must be either a trained NRCS or Corps of Engineers employee. Other parties such as trained environmental consultants may help conduct WRAP evaluations with NRCS. NRCS or Corps-sponsored formal training in WRAP is required for NRCS employees to apply WRAP. WRAP results provided to NRCS from an outside source will be accepted by NRCS in making mitigation or minimal effect exemption decisions if they have been reviewed and approved by the Corps of Engineers.